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October 16, 1980

REEDY ADDRESSES BISHOPS ON ROLE OF MEDIA

CHATTANOOGA -- "Media does not control thought; people cannot be brainwashed by the media," said a former presidential press secretary in addressing the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church here Oct. 7.

George S. Reedy, who was press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson and who is an Episcopal Church lay leader, told the 164 bishops that while the "media does not control thought it does control the perception people hold of the world in which we live."

According to Reedy, the modern American newspaper was developed during the Civil War era because "people wanted factual accounts of what was happening and how many were being killed."

"The press is not educational," he said, "but rather it is to foster dialogue." He claimed that this role makes people uncomfortable because "we know we are right."

In commenting on television, the former press secretary said that medium is not a source of knowledge but rather a means whereby our perception of the world is shaped. "Television cannot carry abstract concepts or complicated thoughts," he said. "It is superb for communicating personalities and for showing what people are like."

Reedy is currently a professor of journalism at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He has served as an Episcopal lay leader in congregations in Milwaukee and in Washington, D.C.

In speaking of the current use of television by fundamentalist religious organizations, Reedy said "This gives people an emotional jolt but I wonder where it goes from there." He said the so-called "electronic church" may be a way for Christians to "recharge their batteries" but he urged churches to find better ways to use the television medium. "We must adapt to it," he said.

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"Behind the communication process there is a solid reality," the journalist told the bishops. "That reality is that in a pluralistic society, our communication system is pluralistic. The sins of the press are the sins of our society and the strengths of the press are the strengths of our society. The press fulfills a role and that role should be understood by the advocates in our society."

Reedy was introduced to the House by Bishop Philip Smith of New Hampshire, chairman of the Episcopal Church Executive Council's communication committee.

Reedy urged the bishops to understand the limits of the media in their own efforts to communicate. "People have a tendency to equate bad news with bad things," he said, which leads to the old fallacy of wanting to "kill the messenger. No one who has every worked with presidents wants to bring them bad news," he commented and added: "John Kennedy canceling the Herald Tribune subscription was virtually the same action as Peter the Great strangling the messenger who brought news of an imperial defeat."

He told them to remember that journalism was meant to be simply "a daily account of events" and could not bear all communication functions.

Neither, he maintained, could television "which, in theological language can't deal with either ontology or teleology. It can only deal in the present and since the Church's concern is the beginning and the end of things, Church people need to be cautious about using it."

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